

## **Of Languages and Epistemologies: Reflections of a Graduate International Student on the Road to Becoming a Researcher**

*Laura (Violeta) Colombo, PhD*

National Council of Technical and Scientific Research  
Buenos Aires (Argentina)

It is late at night, after working all day on my postdoctoral research I am trying to wind down while drawing and jotting down thoughts in my notebook. I am at the living room/office of my apartment in Buenos Aires, the city where I was born and left when I was 26 years old to pursue my graduate studies in the United States of America where for almost nine years I was an international graduate student. So here I am again back in my country, thinking about the intersections between epistemology and language that I have come across on this endless road to becoming a researcher and how I have dealt with these junctures.

I am from Argentina and Spanish is my first language. I am a certified elementary school teacher, who studied literature for 2 years, before receiving an undergraduate degree in Education. When I arrived in the U.S., my methodological background was tied to an academic and research environment that almost aggressively defended a qualitative stance towards research methods. As a university student in Argentina I was academically prepared as a qualitative researcher and practitioner.

I had written a thesis for my undergraduate degree, conducted interviews, and participated in a research project with several professors. When I arrived to the U.S. to pursue my Master's Degree in Intercultural Communication and PhD in Language, Literacy, and Culture, my undergraduate background and research experience provided an excellent foundation for conducting research at the graduate level. Taking field notes in English for my first assignment in the U.S. was a huge challenge. I talked to my professor about how hard it was for me to achieve thick descriptions in English while conducting non-participant observation. At this point my academic written and spoken English had improved a lot, but when having to describe everyday life scenes I would come across numerous unknown words. I did my best adding drawings to my observation notes, but I was not satisfied with that. After showing my work and discussing these issues with my professor she was very supportive and suggested that I could use some Spanish in my raw notes and later work on my English during the write up of my observations. This made me feel more confident and I began to enjoy the observation assignments. The following semester the professor asked me if she could show my assignments to other students as example. I was quite surprised, because, though I felt I could do qualitative research work, I was uncertain about conducting qualitative research in a second language. How could I, a speaker of English as a second language, enact the language practices that qualitative research demanded? How could I construct science through a language that I felt was not mine? And even if I would have had the chance to write my dissertation in Spanish, How could I, a native speaker of Spanish, enact qualitative research if I had acquired all the theoretical knowledge in English? There I was, equally naked of tools in both languages. Enriched with different perspectives but always feeling as though I lacked something in each

language. In English, my writing missed the flow and lacked a sense of ownership to express not only research findings but also my personal reflections as a researcher. In Spanish, I lacked the theory, the terms and the disciplinary structure or absence of structure to make the text and the research flow, being able to question the structure in which I was immersed.

So there I was: limping between languages and epistemologies. Not one, not the other. My way of coping with this situation can be abstracted to what I have learned as the best life-lesson ever: do not exclude, combine. And there you have me combining desperately. I had to write my dissertation in English and since arriving in the U.S., this had been a daunting task and a big issue in my adaptation process as an international student. Combining my native and second language was a strategy that I used to improve my academic writing in English. I started asking for help from friends who spoke Spanish because I felt that they could aid my writing acting like language, cultural and disciplinary translators. An Argentine colleague, who was finishing the graduate program, translated disciplinary expectations pointing out differences between Argentine and American university papers. She also showed me her own papers so this gave me an idea of what professors were expecting from me as a writer. My Mexican friend knew nothing about my field of studies but he had been in the American school since he was ten years old. In addition, he willingly sat down and helped me improve my drafts. He would first read the text and then, in Spanish, we would discuss the ideas I was trying to convey. He would suggest some English words and phrases that would work better in an academic context and I would make the necessary changes. My American roommate would be my last-minute proof-reader. Part of her job as a librarian was to translate texts to Spanish (her second language) so I would proof read her work and she would do the same with mine. Combining English and Spanish while working on the drafts for my course papers was my way of hitting the road to research writing: By discussing my text in Spanish, I could express in my own language not only ideas for my papers but also doubts and frustrations related with my experience of writing in English.

My quantitative research skills were close to zero and this was clashing with my desire to become a serious researcher. I opted to select a graduate advisor who was the appointed expert for qualitative studies in my program who was also a native Spanish speaker. As you can see, I did all the combining I could and thus I ended up with a mixed methods research project. I shared a language with my advisor but her theoretical background was radically different from mine. After some negotiations in English and Spanish I had two theoretical frameworks for my dissertation; my advisor's and mine. I did as much as I could and even pushed myself out of the limits not only to include her theoretical framework, but also to conduct first-rate quantitative and qualitative research. And I did it. And so did my advisor; she walked me through the dissertation process and also the tasks of merging languages, theories and methods next to me. I was speaking English and Spanish, talking the language of two theoretical frameworks and doing quantitative and qualitative research. And nowadays, when I look back at my dissertation process, I realize that I was not lacking by being between languages, theories and research approaches. Instead, I recognize myself to have been the wealthiest person, student, researcher, and academic writer. Because being with one foot on each side of those lines is what allowed me to learn and receive the best of both worlds by combining languages and epistemologies.

---

#### About the Author:

**Violeta**, as everybody calls Laura Colombo, received her M.A. in Intercultural Communication and a PhD in Language, Literacy and Culture from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. She is a postdoctoral fellow for the National Council of Technical and Scientific Research of Argentina, her home country. She conducts research on writing groups and the role of social relations in the dissertation writing process. Email: violeta.colombo@gmail.com